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Ask the expert: sedentary jobs

External Author: [Alcumus](#) 13 July 2015

Category: [Display Screen Equipment \(DSE\)](#), [Ergonomics \(MSDs\)](#)

Question:

I've heard much said recently about sedentary office work and the associated possible health problems. What should we be doing to ensure the welfare of our office staff?

Answer:

There is plenty of advice on how to comply with the legislation on display screen equipment (DSE). But one of the health aspects often overlooked is that of prolonged sitting. There is no legal guidance on this point, but a lot of research and some controversy.

Public Health England recently published guidelines after a previous study suggested that workers who sit for long periods are more prone to chronic diseases such as cancer, diabetes and high blood pressure and have twice the rate of cardiovascular disease of those with standing jobs.

The guidelines suggest that office workers should be on their feet for a minimum two hours a day, preferably four, during working hours.

Employers should warn their staff about the potential dangers of too much time spent sitting, either at work or at home, say the guidelines. As soon as a person sits, calorie burning drops to one a minute, enzyme activity that helps break down fat drops and after two hours the percentage of "good" cholesterol in our blood also falls.

When we sit for long periods, enzyme changes in muscles can lead to increased blood sugar levels. These effects happen quickly and heavy physical exercise outside working hours doesn't seem to offset the negative effects entirely.

Employees should be encouraged to stand and move, perhaps as part of a wider office health campaign. Walking burns three to five times as many calories as sitting, so they should take every opportunity to walk around the office and interrupt sitting as much as they are able.

Most jobs provide opportunities to pause from DSE work and other sitting tasks, to do other work activities or to take natural rest breaks. These changes of activity allow users to get up from their workstations and move around, stretch, stand and change posture.

The message is to get moving during the working day. Engage in light activity and take the stairs rather than the lift. Frequent short breaks from the screen are better than infrequent longer ones: five to 10 minute breaks every hour are better than 20 minutes every two hours.

The guidelines say workers should use adjustable sit-stand desks — in Scandinavia more than 80% of office workers have sit-stand workstations, compared with 1% in Britain — and should go for light walks to alleviate possible musculoskeletal pain.

Employees would probably frown on a mandate to throw away their chairs but encouraging a bit less sitting shouldn't be seen as too radical.

Keith Rhodes is a senior consultant at [Alcumus](#), a leading health, safety and environmental consultancy whose specialists develop tailored and workable solutions.



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